

Fictionalization of Current Socio-Political Issues in J. M. Coetzee's Writing: Narrative Strategies in *Age of Iron* and *Foe**

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Summary

In this paper it is argued that self-conscious reflection on the relevance of writing in two recent novels by J. M. Coetzee, namely *Foe* (1986) and *Age of Iron* (1990), is determined by two distinguishable yet simultaneously complementary strategies: a narrativization of contemporary theoretical discourses in the earlier postmodernist text as opposed to a fictionalization of a discernible real referent in the later novel. Whereas *Foe* provides an extensive dramatization of the problems underlying an attempted re-writing and re-contextualization of eighteenth century tales of adventure, in *Age of Iron* Coetzee resorts to a far more direct scrutiny of the effects of the cultivation of violence in a changing South Africa in the years 1986 to 1989. Despite the contrast between the fictional and real settings in the two novels, it is argued that the fictionalization of current socio-political issues in the later novel cannot be properly understood without considering the manner in which the self-conscious probing of the nature of writing in *Foe* serves as a preparation for the construction the later novel seeks to superimpose on a contemporary and familiar reality.

Opsomming

Daar word in hierdie bydrae geredeneer dat die self-bewuste besinning oor die relevansie van skryf in J. M. Coetzee se resente romans *Foe* (1986) en *Age of Iron* (1990) bepaal word deur twee van mekaar onderskeibare maar terselfdertyd aanvullende strategieë: 'n narrativering van kontemporêre teoretiese diskoerse in die vroeëre postmodernistiese teks teenoor die fiksionalisering van 'n herkenbare reële referent in die meer resente roman. Waar *Foe* gekenmerk word deur 'n uitgebreide dramatisering van die probleme wat pogings tot 'n her-skrywing en her-kontekstualisering van agtiende eeuse avontuurverhale onderlê, word in *Age of Iron* gebruik gemaak van 'n veel direkter beskouing van die uitwerking van die geweldskultuur in 'n veranderende Suid-Afrika gedurende die tydperk 1986 tot 1989. Ten spyte van die kontras tussen die fiksionele en werklike omgewings in die twee romans, word geredeneer dat die fiksionalisering van huidige sosio-politieke kwessies in die meer resente roman nie behoorlik begryp kan word sonder om kennis te neem van die manier waarop die selfbewuste ondersoek van die aard en funksie van skryf in *Foe* gesien kan word as 'n voorbereiding vir die konstruksie wat in *Age of Iron* superponeer word op 'n kontemporêre en bekende werklikheid nie.

1 Introduction

At a first assessment J. M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* (1990) would seem to have little, if anything, in common with his previous novel *Foe* (1986), since the two novels explore different notions of narrativity, thereby verbalizing opposing attitudes in the current "aesthetics" versus "politics" debate prevalent in South African literary circles.¹ When comparing the two novels, a shift of emphasis in Coetzee's view of the relation between literature and reality becomes apparent – he moves from reflection on the conditions and problematics of the processes of (re)-writing a fictional story in *Foe* to a relentless probing of the causes and effects of conditions pertaining to a specific time

and place in a "real" as opposed to an "imaginary" setting in *Age of Iron*. Furthermore, whereas both novels reflect on the substance as well as the production of stories, they do so by resorting to what I see as two different yet complementary strategies: a narrativization of contemporary theoretical discourses in the earlier postmodernist text as opposed to a fictionalization of a discernible real referent in *Age of Iron*.

Whereas *Foe* seems to explore the limits of self-conscious writing in its extensive dramatization of the problems underlying an attempted re-writing and re-contextualization of eighteenth century tales of adventure, *Age of Iron*, on the other hand, attempts a far more direct scrutiny of the effects of the cultivation of violence in a changing South Africa in the years 1986 to 1989. This difference in subject matter suggests that Coetzee is no longer shunning a commitment to a clearly discernible referent in the later novel. Whilst his detractors could still accuse him of hiding behind clever intellectual word-games in the earlier text,² it should be obvious to any informed reader that in *Age of Iron* pressing problems of the day are being couched in a deceptively "transparent" language register. There could surely be no misunderstanding the significance of the narrated events to which this novel refers, since the effects of violence, as these are focalized by an elderly white female dying of cancer during the 1980's in Cape Town, have unfortunately become inscribed in the current South African scene. All of this would seem to suggest that the later novel should be read as a subversion of the notion of narrativity which informed the earlier postmodernist text.

However, the contrast between the fictional and real settings masks the continued preoccupation with death as a metaphor for writing in both novels. Whereas *Foe* concluded with the insight that the dead body of the marginal "other" held forth the promise of a new language, *Age of Iron* takes up this challenge and addresses the phenomenon of death as both the substance and the sustaining force underlying meaningful writing within a contemporary context. In this sense the later text would appear to be a continuation rather than a subversion of *Foe*; put differently, one could say that the extensive dramatization of self-conscious writing in the earlier text could be viewed as a necessary preparation for the story that eventually does get told in the later novel. In fact, I shall argue that there appears to be an even more profound interdependence between the two novels as the fictionalization of a discernible real referent in *Age of Iron* is informed by the narrativization of contemporary theoretical discourses in *Foe*.

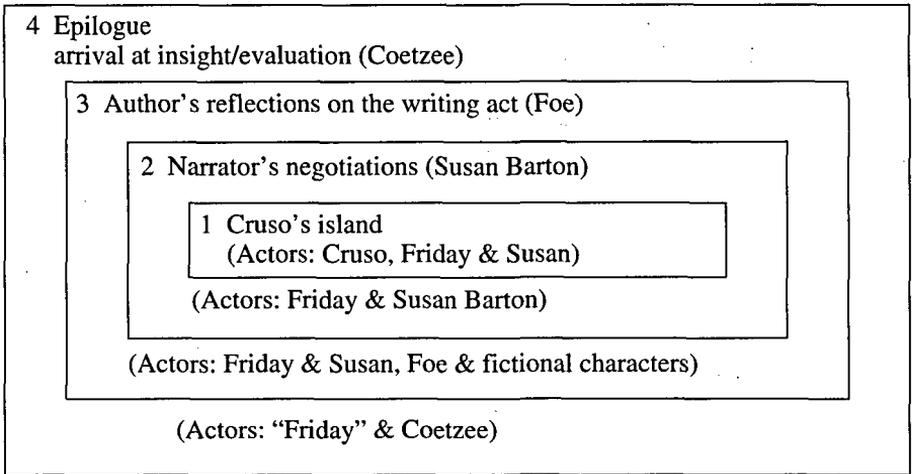
I shall analyze this interdependence by focussing on a number of comparable narrative strategies in the two texts. Quite apart from the preoccupation with death as a metaphor for writing, self-conscious reflection on the writing act, the responsibility of the story-teller and the reliability of language also supports a constant comparison between the novels. In addition, structuring features such as the actantial relations between the main characters or the segmentation of the texts into numbered sections point to an intertextual referential system between the two novels. In this regard, one should not underestimate Coetzee's self-conscious use of language as a means of encouraging a comparative reading strategy, since his use of metaphor, in

particular, deserves to be extensively analyzed in its own right. Although the intricate intertextual linguistic web supported by the ingenious use of metaphor will not be discussed in detail in this paper, its significance for a fictionalization of socio-political issues will be assumed.

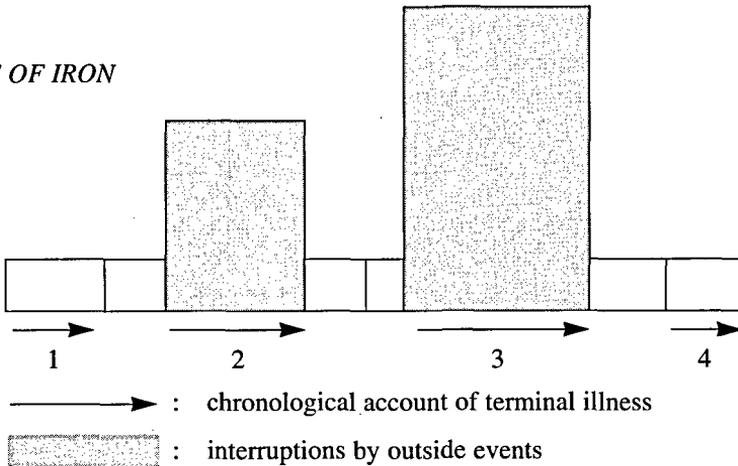
2 Segmentation as a Means of Formal Structuring in Both Novels

At this point, I should like to refer to the formal correspondence between the two novels, as both are divided into four numbered segments which may be diagrammatically presented as follows:

NARRATIVE TEXT *FOE*



AGE OF IRON



It should be clear from the above that in *Foe* the structuring of the text provides a space for its own inbuilt commentary on the writing act, in that the second level reflects on the first, the third looks back on both the second and

first and the last retrospectively refocalizes the third, second and first levels indicated above. In *Age of Iron* on the other hand, the segmentation signals a linear or chronological development in which the last stages of the narrator's terminal illness are marked by an increasing awareness of the socio-political context within which her personal suffering is situated. Despite a constant invasion of her privacy, to an extent which would suggest that it is impossible to shut out the outside world, it is nevertheless remarkable that the terrible events focalized in the middle sections of the novel are framed by the introductory and concluding sections in which death is contemplated via the relationship between the narrator, a wealthy dying woman, and her unlikely companion, the derelict Vercueil, during the last steps towards death. Thus the novel opens with the news of her terminal illness and the discovery of a homeless person on her premises; it focusses, in the middle sections, on the outside events which enforce themselves on her mind – the serious accident in which Bheki and John are involved, the trips to the hospital, the nightmare trip to the township where the narrator not only witnesses scenes of communal violence, but also has to view the dead body of Bheki, Florence's teenage son and, finally, the killing of Bheki's friend, John, by the police whilst he is hiding in Florence's room in the backyard. After this crescendo in the effects of violence, with its climax in the most horrific violation of them all, the desecration of her home by the police and her utter helplessness to save the doomed boy, the last section returns to the private and lonely experience of her own death with only Vercueil to provide a comfort of sorts.

It should be clear that the segmentation of the texts points to different accentuations: in *Foe* the intricate staircased structure favours constant contemplation on the artificiality inherent in story-telling; in *Age of Iron* the interruptions of the main story line (i.e. depiction of the increasing degradation of the narrator's terminal illness) demand an awareness of, and indeed an identification with, the plight of people caught up in the upheaval of social and political change. It is for this reason that death may be said to constitute both the substance of and the sustaining drive for writing in *Age of Iron*. In order to understand the significance of death and its intertwinement with writing in this novel, it is first necessary to consider the self-conscious reflection on the art and artificiality of story-telling in the earlier text.

3 Narrativization of Theoretical Discourses in *Foe*

Probably the most notable feature in the postmodernist text *Foe* is the author's explicit and sustained preoccupation with the nature of stories and their telling, retelling, writing up, and eventual distribution by means of publication.³ What sets such preoccupation apart from postmodernist texts in general, is the fact that theoretical discourses are narrativized. Feminist rewritings of literature, for example the issue of the absence of female castaways in eighteenth century tales of adventure, are addressed by creating a female castaway who could enter the "closed" fictional world of Robinson Crusoe and his black slave, Friday, and act as both character in and focalizer of the fictional world. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic paradigm for writing

is “enacted” in the female focalizer-narrator’s relationships with both Crusoe, as presumably the main character in the original text; and the author Daniel Defoe, as the “recorder” of the “history” of the castaway hero. Although the “levelling process” characterizing the relationship between Susan Barton and Friday takes up most of the text, thereby becoming the dominant story in *Foe*, it is significant that Friday alone remains outside the role of actantial lover to Susan Barton. Since Friday, or rather his dead body, also becomes the focus for telling a different story, the significance of the actantial role of Friday is self-evident for the different focus on the “real” as opposed to the “imaginary” fictional world in the later novel *Age of Iron*. Questions such as the following arise: To whom is the actantial role of Friday assigned in the later novel? And: who is telling his story to whom and for what reason? If one assumes, as I shall argue in this paper, that the fictionalization of a “real” referent is channelled through narrative strategies determining both the substance and the process of writing in *Foe*, a comparison between the two novels seems warranted. This implies that the relevance of writing in the later novel, despite the apparent different focus of “real” as opposed to “imaginary” settings, cannot be properly assessed without taking cognizance of the manner in which the self-conscious probing of the nature of writing in the postmodernist text serves as a preparation for the construction the later novel seeks to superimpose on a contemporary and familiar reality.

I shall argue, then, that the abovementioned different narrative strategies distinguishable in each of the two novels are, in fact, complementary: the narrativization of contemporary theoretical discourses in *Foe* both prepares and explains the strategy apparent in the fictionalization of a discernible real referent in *Age of Iron*. This suggests that an understanding of both strategies is required for an informed reading of Coetzee’s later novel.

When one considers the self-conscious exploration of both the possibilities and the limitations of the art of story-telling in *Foe*, there seems to be an almost “logical” continuation of assumptions regarding writing in *Age of Iron*, as the results of the elaborate reflection of the earlier text are apparently taken for granted and simply “enacted” in the later novel. Besides having the didactic function of forcing the reader to rethink his or her notion of Robinson Crusoe’s adventures, the elaborate dramatization of feminist reappraisals of classic tales in *Foe* also has another side to it since it provides Coetzee with an opportunity to demonstrate the intensely private and subjective quality of writing. It is this aspect of writing that is also extensively illustrated in *Age of Iron*, where the theme of death is channelled through the individual experience of the elderly female narrator who records the circumstances of the last stages of her terminal illness, together with the intervening outside “deaths” impinging on her privacy, in a diary addressed to an absent daughter. The intensely private nature of writing is formulated quite explicitly in one of the telling self-reflective passages on the function of the story-teller in *Age of Iron*. Even after having viewed the corpses of Bheki and his friends, described by the narrator as “. . .the worst thing I have witnessed in my life” (Coetzee 1990: 95), writing still remains, despite a realization of the author’s

social responsibility, in the last instance an attempt at a personal communication with the beloved but absent daughter:

I tell you the story of this morning mindful that the story-teller, from her office, claims the place of right. It is through my eyes that you see; the voice that speaks in your head is mine. Through me alone do you find yourself here on these desolate flats, smell the smoke in the air, see the bodies of the dead, hear the weeping, shiver in the rain. It is my thoughts that you think, my despair that you feel, and also the first stirrings of welcome for whatever will put an end to thought: sleep, death. To me your sympathies flow; your heart beats with mine.

(Coetzee 1990: 95)

There are also some notable differences in the effects, or perhaps the significance, of the narration of personal experiences in the two novels. Whereas it takes almost the entire novel before Susan Barton realizes that her ineffectual attempts at telling either Cruso's or Friday's stories are only a pretext for indulging in her own personal reconstruction of possible castaway stories, in *Age of Iron*, on the contrary, this "truth" is accepted when the elderly dying narrator, in refusing to tell any story other than her own, does not even consider any form of pretence. So, for instance, in the scene with Mr Thabane, after having witnessed the horrific events in the township, she refuses to verbalize an opinion unless it can be expressed in her "own words". Taken on its own, the reluctance to offer an opinion about the causes of the communal suffering might be interpreted as insensitivity or indifference to the plight of the countless victims of political violence in the black townships. However, read against the elaborate exploration of the possibilities and limitations of writing in *Foe*, it becomes clear that Elizabeth Curren's position is informed by humility rather than indifference. Ironically, the honest acknowledgement of the limitations of writing does lead, in *Age of Iron*, to a recording of a particular time in the "history" of a changing country. One could say that whereas the female focalizer, or feminist narrator, in *Foe* vainly attempts to write a "true" account of the "story of the island", and, even more pretentious, in the process also attempts to give voice to Friday, by contrast the elderly dying narrator in the later novel does not wish to record anything but her own private suffering, but in the process unwittingly becomes a reliable recorder of the terrible "truth" which underpins the horrific events comprising the stories of countless "Fridays" in *Age of Iron*.

Another aspect of writing explored in *Foe* and demonstrated in *Age of Iron* concerns the authenticity of recorded events and experiences in the form of a presumably reliable journal or diary. It should be obvious that Susan Barton's frantic attempts to get hold of Cruso's diary, because it would presumably yield his "authentic" story, exemplify a far more indirect way of arriving at what ought to be recorded in an attempt to provide a "true" account than does the actual recording of the "confessions" of the dying narrator in *Age of Iron* in the diary to be sent to her daughter after her death. It is because it is possible, in *Age of Iron*, to take for granted the authenticity of the narrator's diary that reflection on the nature and relevance of writing differs substantially from the elaborate deliberations on the artificiality of story-telling in the

earlier text. So, for instance, in the second section of *Foe*, the procedure of trying to choose between the two female- and male-oriented versions of the story of the island is deliberately displayed as a writing strategy, thereby making explicit the text's reflection on the artificial nature of stories – the narrator laments, “Alas, will the day ever arrive when we can make a story without strange circumstances?” (Coetzee 1986: 67). Naturally, such a procedure pinpoints the importance of textual reflection on the substance which supposedly determines the elements of a story. In *Age of Iron* this substance would appear to highlight, not the romanticized “truth” of “strange circumstances” related in “classic travellers’ tales”, but rather the ugly reality of personal and communal suffering resulting from the cultivation of violence situated within a specific time and space, which is, of course, not so easily evaded in terms of continuous deliberations on the so-called “truth” of past fictions.

In this regard one may also consider yet another aspect of Coetzee's dramatization of the nature of narrativity in *Foe*. It concerns the stories (either informed by some of Defoe's other books or else inspired by myths) which are interspersed among the reflections and embellishments on, for instance, the stories of Cruso, Susan Barton and Friday in the primary narrative of the text. Thus, in the third section of the book speculation on the different versions of the stories Susan Barton and Foe favour, is discussed in terms of the “applications” to be gleaned from the summary of a number of confessional stories in which the female characters are shown to have led remarkably eventful lives, resulting from actantial roles such as those of thieves, murderers or whores. Foe's didactic purpose in telling Susan Barton these stories is made quite explicit, “. . . there comes a time when we must give reckoning of ourselves to the world. . .” (Coetzee 1986: 124). Thus, what seems particularly important about these “confessions” in which the chronological and logical events of personal stories are summarized, is the fact that they are all offered on the threshold of death and may, therefore, be accepted as “true”. It is a kind of truth that is not only coerced by a sense of impending death but indeed informed by it. It is for this reason that the progressive deterioration of Elizabeth Curren's illness runs parallel to an increasing insight into the meaning of her life.

It is precisely this circumstance which is the generating narrative force in *Age of Iron*, since this novel consists of the letters written to an absent daughter by the elderly female narrator about the final stages of her terminal illness and ultimate death. Thus, for Coetzee, the “last confessions” of a person condemned to death are to be viewed as “true”. Consequently, deliberations extending beyond personal suffering and implicating the indescribable “truth” of the communal suffering of the South African people generally, may only be indirectly presented via the confessional deliberations of the narrator. Given the historical and socio-political context in which her writing is embedded, confessions are, of course, politicized, so that the dying narrator's stocktaking of her own life will inevitably contain an awareness of any “communal” guilt for which she might wish to hold herself responsible. Towards the end of the book, in the scene in the vacant lot which marks the

culmination of the levelling process required for an unconditional acceptance of Vercueil as both her guardian angel and her trusted companion, she is ready to make a "full confession" of her sins to him. The essence of her guilt is seen as her failure to have made a difference, because she had not realized that the times called for heroism rather than mere goodness:

'It is a confession I am making here, this morning, Mr Vercueil,' I said, 'as full a confession as I know how. I withhold no secrets. I have been a good person, I freely confess to it. I am a good person still. What times these are when to be a good person is not enough!

'What I had not calculated on was that more might be called for than to be good. For there are plenty of good people in this country. We are two a penny, we good and nearly-good. What the times call for is quite different from goodness. The times call for heroism. A word that, as I speak it, sounds foreign to my lips. I doubt that I have ever used it before, even in a lecture. Why not? Perhaps out of respect. Perhaps out of shame. As one drops one's gaze before a naked man. I would have used the words *heroic status* instead, I think, in a lecture. The hero with his heroic status. The hero, that antique naked figure.'

(Coetzee 1990: 150-151)

All of this would seem to point to a particular sequential relationship between the two novels: in *Foe* a painstaking dramatization of the processes whereby stories may be produced and reliably told; in *Age of Iron* an attempt at relating just such a reliable story. In the second section of *Foe* the relationship between the two novels becomes even more apparent when the vehicle for writing is changed from Cruso's undiscovered assumed journal to the letters written by the female focalizer-cum-narrator to the prospective author. Besides the progression from non-existent journal to concrete letters, it is clear that in this section the technique of dramatization is extended to the problems arising from and the conditions pertaining to an attempted rewriting of an eighteenth century tale of adventure, thereby offering constant reflection on the relevance of such an enterprise in a contemporary context. Again, one may argue that there is a sense in which Coetzee's self-conscious contemplation of the possibilities and limitations of writing in *Foe* may be read as a necessary preparation for his commitment to a depiction of socio-political issues in *Age of Iron*. What I am trying to say is that the apparent direct engagement with reality in *Age of Iron* can only be appreciated in terms of Coetzee's notion of the nature and function of stories in *Foe*. I shall try to defend such an assumption by focussing, firstly, on the question of what ought to be the substance of stories. It would appear that the upshot of extensive reflection on the substance of stories in *Foe* resulted in the insight that Friday should be at the centre of any attempted rewriting of Defoe's classic tale of adventure. In order to pre-empt a superficial reading of Friday as being merely the representative of the countless number of blacks impinging on the private story of the white dying narrator in *Age of Iron*, it is necessary to focus on the actantial role of Friday.

4 The Actantial Role of Friday in *Foe* and Its Significance for the Fictionalization of Social Commentary in *Age of Iron*

At a first assessment it would appear that Coetzee addresses both the substance of and the means whereby a worthwhile story should be told in *Age of Iron*. In describing the suffering of countless “Fridays” in the townships, one may initially be tempted to conclude that at last he is directly addressing the social and political inequalities by explicitly attacking an unfair system of government. And moreover, he is doing so in an apparently straightforward manner without the convolutions of the staircased structure of reflections upon reflections on the writing process that formed the substance of the interlocking stories in *Foe*. However, as has already been suggested above, the actantial role ascribed to Friday is not only, perhaps not even primarily, continued in the obvious fictionalization characterizing the depiction of the revolution against a discredited system in *Age of Iron*. There are two aspects of the depiction of Friday in *Foe* that are relevant to an understanding of the continuation of Friday’s actantial role in *Age of Iron*: the process of equalization between Susan Barton and Friday, which underpins his transition from submissive slave to silent companion; and the impossibility of communicating with the mute Friday, which not only makes him susceptible to narrative manipulation, but which also highlights the limitations inherent in writing. These different aspects result in Friday’s actantial role being enacted by different representatives in *Age of Iron*: the social outcast Vercueil fulfils the role of companion to the narrator, whilst Bheki and his friends, the “children of iron”, since they resort to violence as the only relevant means of communication, signify the problematical status of meaningful writing in a contemporary context.

4.1 The Relationship Between the Narrator and Vercueil

The growing towards insight and understanding is depicted in terms of personal relationships in both novels. In *Foe* the relationship between Susan Barton and Friday is marked by a “levelling process” which culminates in their shared actantial role of gypsies roaming the English countryside as filthy outcasts of society. Ironically these deplorable circumstances result in some illuminations that have long evaded Susan Barton. The moment she inadvertently resorts to Friday’s dance in a state of misery – and not as a calculated move to penetrate his indifference towards her – she surprisingly discovers its sustaining powers. A discovery of a related nature concerns one of the “strongholds” of civilization, namely personal cleanliness. To her own surprise Susan Barton, after having been accused of being a gypsy, has to admit to the fact of barely having washed on the road and “...feeling none the worse for it” (Coetzee 1986: 108). It is this aspect of a “levelling process”, in which a distaste for uncleanness has to be shed, that is echoed in *Age of Iron* in the relationship between the ailing representative from a privileged white class and the “smelly vagrant” she eventually comes to accept as a companion, through whose eyes she is led to discover both the meaning of real suffering and the spirit of genuine caring.

In the course of the equalization process, Elizabeth Curren has to overcome her distaste for the physically unclean and disabled Vercueil with his crooked fingers, dirty fingernails, smelly feet and unclean underwear. This levelling process, in which she not only has to adapt to his smell, but also at times shares his bottle with him, eventually leads to her thinking of Vercueil in terms of an angel, a messenger and even a (caring) lover. Despite the importance of the levelling process for the relationships in both novels, the actantial roles assigned to Vercueil in *Age of Iron* show there is both correspondence with and difference from the actantial role of Friday in *Foe*. Vercueil's role of angel is comparable to Friday's characterization in terms of a divine-like figure; but as already suggested above, the role of lover distinguishes Vercueil from Friday. This is important, because Vercueil's usefulness for writing is linked to his actantial role as lover. (We shall see that Bheki and his friend John resemble Friday in remaining outside the actantial role of lover to the narrator.) These actantial roles remain inextricably intertwined with Vercueil's outward appearance of a derelict, so that Florence calls him a "rubbish person" and Bheki and his friend even physically attack him for being a despicable alcoholic. This suggests that it takes someone living under the constant threat of herself succumbing to "the indifferent squalor of old age" (Coetzee 1990: 33) to be able, eventually, to accept the idea that Vercueil could be a companion capable of fulfilling the abovementioned actantial roles assigned to him in the novel. It also suggests that only someone subjected to the deplorable conditions of poverty would have the "credentials" to take on the role of companion to a terminally ill elderly person. This becomes clear in the following passage, where Elizabeth Curren has to come to terms with the fact that although she longs to be comforted by her daughter, it is in fact only Vercueil who would be both able and willing to provide the understanding she needs:

There is something degrading about the way it all ends – degrading not only to us but to the idea we have of ourselves, of humankind. People lying in dark bedrooms, in their own mess, helpless. People lying in hedges in the rain. You will not understand this, yet. Vercueil will.

(Coetzee 1990: 128)

It is the quality of his understanding that explains why Vercueil can eventually be considered by the dying narrator in terms of his roles of angel, messenger and lover. His actantial role of guardian angel culminates in two actions: his carrying Elizabeth to safety after her experience underneath the fly-over and the final embrace signalling her death. In this sense, Vercueil is perceived to be the real comforter, because he is the person "at hand", whereas her daughter is unreachable on a different continent:

The thought came: Whom, of all beings on earth, do I know best at this hour? Him. Every hair of his beard, every crease of his forehead known to me. Him, not you. Because he is here, beside me, now.

(Coetzee 1990: 147)

Conditional to such a perception is, however, the process of equalization which culminates in the scene where the desecration of her house by the

police and their killing of Bheki's friend John in Florence's room, force her to seek refuge behind a pillar under the fly-over. She joins here the ranks of the homeless and even empties her bladder whilst lying wrapped only in the quilt covering her nightdress. It is here that she almost succumbs to death, in the sense of "not caring" any longer about the noise, the pain, the degradation or the streetchildren pawing her body or prying open her mouth with a stick in their search for something to sell at the pawn shop. We are here reminded of the initial characterization of Vercueil as one of the homeless in terms that stressed both their destitution and their impending threat to the dying:

The first of the carrion-birds, prompt, unerring. How long can I fend them off? The scavengers of Cape Town, whose number never dwindles. Who go bare and feel no cold. Who sleep outdoors and do not sicken. Who starve and do not waste. Warmed from within by alcohol. The contagions and infections in their blood consumed in liquid flame. Cleaners-up after the feast. Flies, dry-winged, glazen-eyed, pitiless. My heirs.

(Coetzee 1990: 4)

At what initially appears to be the end of the road for Elizabeth Curren, since the streetchildren hover about like "crows", changes when she is literally sniffed out by Vercueil's dog and then carried by Vercueil "into a dark wooded space" (1990: 146) where they spend the night lying next to each other on a piece of cardboard. This episode shows Vercueil in his roles of both guardian angel and caring lover. It is reminiscent of the scene at the beginning of *Foe* where Susan Barton is carried to safety by Friday. Elizabeth Curren even draws attention to the fact that she is a tall woman being carried by a man who apparently does not have a strong physique; and later on, she also becomes conscious of the birdsong that "poured down like rain" (Coetzee 1990: 151), which is a clear allusion to the sounds of the island as experienced by Susan Barton. The only difference compared with the scene from *Foe*, and further evidence of the equalization process, is the fact that Vercueil brings her sweet wine instead of water when she asks for something to drink.

Their spending the night together on a flattened cardboard box in a vacant lot is also, of course, an enactment of Vercueil in his role of lover, which suggests that Elizabeth Curren has indeed become used to his smelly presence. This signals the outcome of a lengthy levelling process, whereby the narrator gradually had to move through various stages of acceptance of values other than those she had abided by during her whole life. However, it is through the eyes of a filthy and idle homeless person that Elizabeth Curren can eventually look upon her own death. As indicated by the quote of her "full confession" above, it is also through his presence, in the sense of someone who is there to listen to her "confessions", that writing about death is made possible. This, of course, culminates in the death scene and Vercueil's cold embrace:

I got back into bed, into the tunnel between the cold sheets. The curtains parted; he came in beside me. For the first time I smelled nothing. He took me in his arms and held me with mighty force, so that the breath went out of me in a rush. From that embrace there was no warmth to be had.

(Coetzee 1990: 181)

As the companion forced upon her during her last journey, Vercueil stands outside more obvious substitutes for Friday – he is not black, and therefore clearly not part of the “struggle” depicted by the militant youths. He is thus on the other side of the divide separating the stories of suffering and death as these are depicted, respectively, in the narrator’s highly individual experience of her own impending death, and the countless deaths, reflected by means of statistics only, in the black townships. That this choice is deliberate, becomes apparent in a passage where Vercueil’s very weakness, for instance his addiction to alcohol, is interpreted not only as conducive to writing, but also as a means to counter the inflexibility of the self-important militant youths:

He watches but does not judge. Always a faint haze of alcohol about him. Alcohol, that softens, preserves. *Mollificans*. That helps us to forgive. He drinks and makes allowances. His life all allowances. He, Mr V, to whom I speak. Speak and then write. Speak in order to write. While to the rising generation, who do not drink, I cannot speak, can only lecture. Their hands clean, their fingernails clean. The new puritans, holding to the rule, holding up the rule. Abhorring alcohol, that softens the rule, dissolves iron. Suspicious of all that is idle, yielding, roundabout. Suspicious of devious discourse, like this.

(Coetzee 1990: 75)

Thus Vercueil’s difference from other possible choices for a continuation of Friday’s role is explained in terms of the significance of the psychoanalytic paradigm for writing. This is made explicit in passages where his actantial role of lover is directly coupled to his mediating function for writing – it is not only that he is the chosen messenger to deliver the letters to her daughter after her death; it is also that without speaking to him first, it would have been impossible to write at all:

I put food in front of him, took my pills, waited.

Holding the loaf of bread with his bad hand, he cut a slice, buttered it thickly, cut cheese. His fingernails filthy. Who knows what else he had been touching. And this is the one to whom I speak my heart, whom I trust with last things. Why this crooked path to you?

My mind like a pool, which his finger enters and stirs. Without that finger stillness, stagnation.

A way of indirection. By indirection I find direction out. A crab’s-walk.

His dirty fingernail entering me.

(Coetzee 1990: 74)

The depiction of the equalizing process between the narrator and the derelict sent to fulfil the roles of angel, messenger and lover suggests that socio-political commentary is approached in a devious manner through an exploration of the reality of what it entails to be destitute, idle and poor. Socio-political commentary is, however, also depicted by means of the continuation of Friday’s role in representatives from the “rising generation”.

4.2 The Narrator’s Focalization of Bheki and John

Friday’s characterization in terms of mutilation, slavery, loss and worship has implications for the manner in which his actantial role is filled by both

Vercueil, the smelly vagrant, and representatives from the black community. The actantial role of submissive slave dramatizes an ability to serve unselfishly and with devotion, regardless of the relevance of the labour. In *Foe* this labour consists in helping Cruso by carrying stones with which to build his terraces. In *Age of Iron* the inequalities between whites and blacks are defined in terms of the tasks they have to carry out on a daily basis. Thus the analeptic scene in which William's job of killing countless chickens is described, gives rise to the following contemplation:

I thought of all the men across the breadth of South Africa who, while I sat gazing out of the window, were killing chickens, moving earth, barrowful upon barrowful; of all the women sorting oranges, sewing buttonholes. Who would ever count them, the spadefuls, the oranges, the buttonholes, the chickens? A universe of labour, a universe of counting: like sitting in front of a clock all day, killing the seconds as they emerged, counting one's life away.

(Coetzee 1990: 41)

It should be clear that the social commentary on a system which favours unfair labour practices, is unambiguously depicted in the continuation of Friday's actantial role as a slave, because it draws attention to the plight of a whole class of people imprisoned by monotonous and never-ending tasks. This, then, is the opposite of Vercueil's indulgence in "leeglopery".

If the continuation of Friday's role as slave serves as a strategy whereby socio-political commentary regarding labour practices may be relayed, then his double mutilation may be read as an indication that Bheki and John would, like Friday, remain both uncommunicative and distant, in the sense of being untouchable, in their encounters with the narrator. This is illustrated by the scene in the hospital where Bheki's friend John remains deaf to the narrator's words and also recoils from her touch:

It was not a clasp, not a long touch; it was the merest brush, the merest lingering of my fingertips on the back of his hand. But I felt him stiffen, felt an angry electric coil.

For your mother, who is not here, I said within myself. Aloud I said: 'Be slow to judge.'

Be slow to judge: what did I mean? If I did not know, who else could be expected to? Certainly not he. Yet in his case, I was sure, the incomprehension ran deeper. My words fell off him like dead leaves the moment they were uttered. The words of a woman, therefore negligible; of an old woman, therefore doubly negligible; but above all of a white.

(Coetzee 1990: 72)

This passage clearly questions the relevance of language in a context of social and political upheaval, and it simultaneously illustrates the consequences of Friday's muteness and the dramatization of a failed communication in *Foe*. In this regard one is reminded of Susan Barton's insight, in her role as the mediating narrative agent, into the difficulty inherent in any attempt to invent a story that would adequately address the so-called "other":

'The story of Friday's tongue is a story unable to be told, or unable to be told by me. That is to say, many stories can be told of Friday's tongue, but the true story

is buried within Friday, who is mute. The true story will not be heard till by art we have found a means of giving voice to Friday.'

(Coetzee 1986: 118)

In *Age of Iron* Coetzee does not flinch from addressing the horror of the deaths of countless youths in township violence. But he still cannot pretend to be able to speak for them, or to give voice to their suffering. Instead, he channels this suffering through a report about the *effects* of signs of suffering on the dying narrator as a member of the same privileged liberal white group as himself. This illustrates the problematical status of words, talking and writing in a landscape where violence has become a way of living. It is not so much that the dying narrator refrains from speaking; it is rather that her words would be ineffectual because nobody would listen to them. The importance of Vercueil's function of "listening" reasserts itself. One may infer from the above that Friday's double mutilation shows that Coetzee's vision of the so-called "other" extends beyond the categories one would normally be tempted to draw between oppressors and oppressed, or white and black, in assessing the relevance of writing in a contemporary South African context.

Another significant continuation of aspects of the actantial role ascribed to Friday underlies the pre-occupation with death as a metaphor for writing. The fixation on dead bodies in the concluding section of *Foe* exemplifies the necessity to explore the potential of the dead for writing, even if it means descending into their watery grave, observing the state of their corpses and, in the case of Friday, ". . . trying to find a way in" (Coetzee 1986: 157) by forcing a fingernail between the upper and lower rows of his teeth. The double focalization, offered in two different endings to the novel, is used as a deliberate writing strategy to make explicit the significance of Friday's dead body for writing, since it is only through an exploration of his dead body that the sounds of the island become audible to the contemporary authorial agent. Again, this focus on writing is important for an assessment of the relevance of writing in *Age of Iron*. A comparative reading discloses some surprising similarities between the manner in which Friday's dead body is focalized by the authorial agent in the concluding sections of *Foe*, and the focalization, by the elderly narrator, of the bodies of Bheki and his friends as well as, surprisingly, a self-focalization of an anticipated exploration of her own dead body. That Bheki and his friends, as the victims of violence in the townships, constitute a collective continuation of the exploited Friday in his watery grave is suggested by the manner in which Elizabeth Curren perceives the effect of rain on their bodies:

The inside of the hall was a mess of rubble and charred beams. Against the far wall, shielded from the worst of the rain, were five bodies neatly laid out. The body in the middle was that of Florence's Bheki. He still wore the grey flannel trousers, white shirt and maroon pullover of his school, but his feet were bare. His eyes were open and staring, his mouth open too. The rain had been beating on him for hours, on him and his comrades, not only here but wherever they had been when they met their deaths; their clothes, their very hair, had a flattened, dead look. In the corners of his eyes there were grains of sand. There was sand in his mouth.

(Coetzee 1990: 94)

The scene of Bheki's death, and especially the exposure of his body to the incessant rain, should be read in conjunction with the description of Friday's body as it is perceived by the contemporary author, as opposed to the eighteenth century female narrator, in the dramatization of the final explorative "voyage" of the text. What is important, is that Friday's dead body in both instances where the authorial agent tries to part his teeth with a fingernail, releases the sounds of the island, and thereby suggests the possibility of going beyond language:

...I begin to hear the faintest faraway roar: as she said, the roar of waves in a seashell; and over that, as if once or twice a violin-string were touched, the whine of the wind and the cry of a bird.

(Coetzee 1986: 154)

His mouth opens. From inside him comes a slow stream, without breath, without interruption. It flows up through his body and out upon me; it passes through the cabin, through the wreck; washing the cliffs and shores of the island, it runs northward and southward to the ends of the earth. Soft and cold, dark and unending, it beats against my eyelids, against the skin of my face.

(Coetzee 1986: 157)

The suggestion of a language beyond language is echoed in *Age of Iron* in a couple of instances. Upon first encountering Vercueil, the narrator observes that his gesture of spitting, in defiance of her chiding him for his idleness, could be interpreted as a special word, "...undeniable, from a language before language" (Coetzee 1990: 7). Mostly, the notion of a language beyond language is perceived as some kind of sound or noise. Given the importance of the sounds emanating from Friday's drowned body, there are two instances in *Age of Iron* where either indescribable suffering or else the experience of peace brought about by genuine caring is depicted in terms that are reminiscent of the sounds of the island. The latter is exemplified in Elizabeth Curren's awareness of the birdsong as an indication of a climax in the process of equalization on the morning after she had spent the night lying next to Vercueil on a piece of cardboard in the vacant lot. The former is signified in one of the most moving passages in the novel, in the description of the mass response from a crowd forced to witness the wilful destruction of their homes in a black township:

Save for an old woman with a sagging mouth standing in a doorway, there was no one in sight. But as we walked further the noise we had heard, which at first might have been taken for wind and rain, began to break up into shouts, cries, calls, over a ground-bass which I can only call a sigh: a deep sigh, repeated over and over, as if the wide world itself were sighing.

(Coetzee 1990: 87)

In trying to verbalize the communal suffering by conjuring up the sounds of the island, Coetzee shows that the words of his dying narrator are, after all, not as ineffective as the reader may have been led to believe. Because their grief is expressed in the "language" of Friday, these people subjected to violence and wilful killing may be seen as the "true" representatives of a Friday that would constitute an object worthy of writing about.

There is, of course, another scene which is strongly reminiscent of the contemporary authorial agent's attempt to explore Friday's body with a view to discovering a meaningful language. Elizabeth Curren, when lying helpless and half dead under the fly-over, is subjected to similar treatment from the streetchildren when they force a stick between her lips and gums. However, far from releasing the sounds of the island, she finds it difficult even to phrase a word of protest: "An ugly noise came from my throat, a dry rasp like wood splitting. The hand withdrew. 'Don't – ' I said; but my palate was sore, it was hard to form words" (Coetzee 1990: 145). What would at first appear to be a parody of the closing scene of *Foe*, is countered by another instance in which the suggestion that the dying narrator may herself be regarded as a worthy representative of Friday, is illustrated in an imagined scene where she anticipates an exploration of her own dead body:

A fly settles on my cheek. It cleans itself. It begins to explore. It walks across my eye, my open eye. I want to blink, I want to wave it away, but I cannot. Through an eye that is and is not mine I stare at it. It licks itself, if that is the word. There is nothing in those bulging organs that I can recognize as a face. But it is upon me, it is here: it struts across me, a creature from another world.

(Coetzee 1990: 24)

This is, of course, reminiscent of a similar exploration described in the third section of *Foe*, where *Foe* suggests various explanations of the mystery of Friday's rowing out on a log of wood and strewing petals over the place where the ship had presumably sunk. One of them deals with the necessity to explore the mystery of an eye and to take on the responsibility to write about such a mystery:

'I said the heart of the story,' resumed *Foe*, 'but I should have said the eye, the eye of the story. Friday rows his log of wood across the dark pupil – or the dead socket – of an eye staring up at him from the floor of the sea. He rows across it and is safe. To us he leaves the task of descending into that eye. Otherwise, like him, we sail across the surface and come ashore none the wiser, and resume our old lives, and sleep without dreaming, like babes.'

(Coetzee 1986: 141)

The mediating function of Vercueil is hinted at in this passage. It is because Elizabeth Curren has learnt to look at herself, through his gaze, or as in the passage above through the gaze of some imagined "creature from another world", that she is able to write about her experience of death. Read in conjunction with the scene where she sees herself as an object of exploitation through the eyes of the streetchildren, it becomes clear that the equalization process served the purpose of promoting her experiences on the threshold of death, and her attempt to record these experiences in a confessional diary to the person whom she perceived to be her heir, to the status of relevant writing in a contemporary context.

5 Concluding Remarks

In conclusion we may briefly consider the extent to which the responsibility to write about the "mysteries" in Friday's story has, in fact, been concretized by

the exploration of death as a metaphor for writing in *Age of Iron*. It would appear that Coetzee's notion of responsible writing precludes any pretence at attempting to speak the truth of the "other". Thus, although his female narrator is not unaffected by the senseless killing in the black townships, especially of youths deprived of their childhood and turned prematurely into men of "iron", she does not pretend to understand, let alone be capable of doing anything about it; rather she accepts the responsibility provided by opportunity to at least *report* about the manner in which such signs of suffering inscribe themselves upon her own private struggle towards the final stage where death may be embraced. Thus, any attempt to unravel the "mysteries" of Friday, that is, to make explicit, for instance, the extent of the suffering experienced by the representatives enacting aspects of Friday's actantial role in *Age of Iron*, has of necessity to be attempted by means of a "devious discourse", consisting of a personalized account of a private responsibility to attempt to write about death in a manner that would ensure that such writing is simultaneously informed by death.

In my opinion Coetzee takes his responsibility as an author very seriously. Therefore, his writing in *Age of Iron* is as unpretentious and restrained as it was in *Foe*. Despite the "responsibility" of writing about the political and social injustices in the country, which entails, amongst other things, allowing the oppressed "other" a voice, Coetzee still refrains from doing this. Instead, his responsibility is shown in a different manner, by indicating just how ineffectual an instrument his chosen narratorial voice proves to be, imprisoned as she has been her entire life as a member of a privileged few, and now significantly reduced to powerlessness through her illness and impending death. It is not given to her to talk "for" the "other" living at the other side of the great divide, even if their representatives do force themselves upon her hospitality, thereby sensitizing her spirit of caring and charity. This does not mean, however, that her own writing, which is offered as "confessions" on the threshold of death, and which contains some penetrating socio-political commentary, should be ignored. Despite the "devious discourse", whereby, as I have argued, the fictionalization of socio-political commentary in *Age of Iron* is channelled through and informed by the narrativization of theoretical discourses in *Foe*, there is an important difference between the two novels. In the later novel Coetzee would appear to be less concerned with an elusive narrative signifier, and, instead, more conscious of an ungraspable signified, perhaps because the substance of his story is too horrific to be expressed through the medium of words. His writing is relevant because it is *informed* and results in an acknowledgement of the limitations of language and words. The author, even if confessions on the threshold of death could apparently guarantee the "truth" of his writing, can never be more than a reporter, and his perspective is of necessity subjected to the limitations of a personalized view. However, it does not follow that his "devious" writing strategy should, therefore, be judged insignificant or irrelevant. On the contrary, it is precisely via this limited perspective that a deeper penetration of a (partial) reality is disclosed, which in turn lends itself to a more informed consideration of broader contextual factors, such as the social and political realities in which

the writing was initially produced and to which it will eventually, in a sense, be returned.

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Notes

1. This debate has also largely dictated divergent notions regarding the relevance of Coetzee's writing for at least the past decade. See the special issue of *JLS/TLW* 5(2), 1989, which was devoted to an exploration of various angles of Coetzee's writing as manifested in *Foe* (1986). See also David Attwell's recent reassessment of the relevance of Coetzee's writing in *J. M. Coetzee. South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (1993).
2. See, however, David Attwell's convincing argument that favouring the signifier over the signified in *Foe* does not preclude (allegorical) contemplation of "the conditions that writers like Coetzee are forced to confront" (1993: 104).
3. For a more detailed discussion of this aspect see my reading of *Foe* in the special issue of *JLS/TLW* 5(2): 145–182.

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